‘Why aren’t you at work?’: Negotiating economic models of fathering identity

(accepted final version)

Shirani, F. Henwood, K. and Coltart, C. (2012) Published in *Fathering*. 10 (3): 274-290

Abstract

Much has been made of the apparent trend towards men’s greater involvement in fatherhood, suggesting moves towards more egalitarian couple relationships characterised by greater role-sharing. Yet alongside this it has also been argued that the breadwinner/provider role remains central to men’s fatherhood identity and continues to be underlined by current policy. That providing apparently remains a central aspect of successful fatherhood subsequently raises potential challenges for men who experience unemployment. Presenting illustrative case study data from a qualitative longitudinal study, we explore how changes in occupational trajectories away from models of full-time working outside of the home hold implications for men’s sense of competence or vulnerability, and how provider and involved carer positions are intertwined in men’s fatherhood identities.

Keywords: Home-working; Stay-at-home fathers; unemployment; caring; qualitative longitudinal

Introduction

An apparent trend towards men's greater involvement in family life has been an important focus of inquiry in studies of contemporary fatherhood (Dermott, 2003; Lamb, 2010). Within research on shifting gender and parenting relations, it has been suggested that a significant change has occurred towards more egalitarian couple relationships characterised by greater role-sharing (Sullivan, 2010), while inquiries into men's responses to changing socio-cultural ideals of fatherhood and masculinity have highlighted possible transformations in men's experiences of themselves as paternal subjects (Henwood and Procter, 2003). Whilst there seems to a general sentiment shared by authors that fatherhood is undergoing notable transformations, debate often seeks to address complexity and ambiguity in the nature and extent of change. This has included suggestions that changes are more evident at the level of culture than conduct (Walker and McGraw, 2000:567), and reflections on continuity, in particular the enduring centrality of the breadwinner/provider role as an aspect of men's fatherhood identity (Townsend, 2002; Featherstone, 2003). For example, in her longitudinal work with first-time fathers, Miller (2010) notes how the importance of paid work and having a recognisable and valued worker identity outside the home ran through many of her participants' narratives. Studies of fathering across generations have illustrated that despite significant changes in caring responsibilities and involvement, a 'work focussed' model of fatherhood shows continuity over time (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006) and this position continues to be underlined by current policy (see Miller, 2010 for discussion).

Although it has been argued that providing is no longer the sole preserve of men (Dermott, 2008) and that modern fatherhood ideals extend far beyond financial

contributions to include other types of care and provision (Roy 2004; Thomas and Bailey, 2006), continuing powerful ideals around providing for children (Miller, 2010) raise potential challenges for men who experience unemployment; a group apparently increasing in the aftermath of the global economic downturn (see Spence, 2011). Previous contractions of the economy have seen men's parenting status as breadwinners change (Elder, 1999), and involvement emphasised as a fatherhood identity not premised on financial provision (La Rossa, 1997). This is exemplified in media articles since the economic downturn which have highlighted the experience of stay-at-home dads, suggesting that unemployment offers an opportunity for reinvention to focus on a more caring role (e.g. BBC news, January 18th 2011). At the same time, articles currently abound in relation to 'feckless fathers' who shirk both caring and financial responsibilities for their children and rely on the state as a provider (e.g. Dowling, 2011). The moral panic of the late 1980s about absent fathers who were not economically responsible for their children (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003:55) was recently echoed by Prime Minister David Cameron in an article suggesting absent fathers need to be 'stigmatised' for forsaking their responsibilities (Cameron, 2011). Previous studies have explored the notion of unemployment as a crisis of masculinity (see Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003, for discussion). Such crises may be intensified among men as fathers who may be fearful of being perceived as 'deadbeat dads' when unable to provide financially for their families (Roy, 2004), or engage in financial risk-taking in order to fulfil the provider role (Willott and Griffin, 1999).

Whilst providing appears to remain an important aspect of men's fathering identity, expectations that men will be both earners and involved carers has led some to suggest that men now experience similar demands to 'have it all' to those faced by

women (Daly, 1996). Although, maintaining the status of 'good father' and 'good worker' simultaneously is not necessarily problematic for fathers (Dermott, 2006). However, criticisms of men's lesser involvement in childcare often overlook the way in which work is not necessarily a separation from family but can be seen as a manifestation of family commitment (Townsend, 2002:136, Christiansen and Palkovitz, 2001). Some recent writings offer a more optimistic picture of the way men combine home and work. For example, Ranson (2011) explored the experience of 24 'working fathers'; men who adopted non-traditional paths in the allocation of paid work and childcare, and found that in no cases was the father's job privileged over the mother's. She argues that dominant understandings of men as unencumbered workers need to be challenged, instead highlighting the importance of accounting for the critical influence of the couple relationship in which work and family arrangements are negotiated. Similarly, in a study of unemployment amongst white collar technology workers in the US, Lane (2009) found most men were comfortable taking on responsibility for housework and childcare whilst their female partners worked, suggesting it reflected a more modern understanding of masculinity as for a man to accept a wife's support indicates an open-minded, non-sexist attitude towards changing gender roles and women's professional achievement. In addition, Doucet (2004) has suggested that stay-at-home fathers are in a unique position to create new forms of masculinity, although this can be challenging in light of the 'long shadow of hegemonic masculinity' hanging over them.

In the context of these divergent findings, qualitative researchers studying fathering have emphasised the importance of situated (spatial, temporal and relational) approaches to fathering identities and experiences (e.g. Doucet, 2006a; Marsiglio *et al.* 2005). A focus of this approach has been to distinguish between

fatherhood as a set of institutionalised and gender differentiated norms and expectations (with providing historically prioritised over or equated to father care) and *fathering* as everyday practice, before examining the complex and dynamic interactions between the two in diverse and shifting contemporary contexts. While evolving macro socio-economic contexts can be seen to impact on fathers' workforce participation in diverse ways (by shaping processes of 'choice' and 'constraint'), cultural discourses, policy contexts and personal-relational experiences of gender, work and care within families also play crucial (and dynamic) roles in mediating links between providing and father identity.

Our previous work has highlighted the significance men place on providing financially as an important but not sole aspect of their father identity, elucidating when and why it can be a particularly pressuring aspect of their parenting experiences (Henwood *et al*., 2010; Shirani *et al*., 2012). In this paper, we explore the situated experiences and sense-making of fathers as they undergo changes in their work and family arrangements. Presenting data from a qualitative longitudinal study, we consider how changes in occupational trajectories hold implications for men's fathering identities, relationships and lived experiences. Men's shifting positions in relation to paid work, home life and care, and the particular circumstances in which these changes are brought to bear are shown to differentially affect men's sense of competence and vulnerability and how they negotiate competing expectations around providing and care. The implications of different work/domestic situations and experiences in terms of supporting or undermining particular fathering identities are based on different settlements between co-existing or intertwined provider and caregiving positions (Finn and Henwood, 2009; Coltart and Henwood, 2012); and so these are also explored. By invoking a situated, textured qualitative approach the

paper sheds light on both the gendered meanings infusing domestic and work labour and the more nuanced distinctions at work when men (and women) encounter and make sense of their particular situations, lives and worlds.

The Study

Data for this paper come from the 'Men as Fathers' study which was part of the UK-wide qualitative longitudinal Timescapes network. In 2000 thirty expectant first-time fathers were qualitatively interviewed and then followed through into second, and in some cases third, interviews within the year after the birth of their first child[1]. When this original project became part of the Timescapes network (2007-2012), nineteen of these participants were re-interviewed when their children were eight years old. A second sample of sixteen expectant fathers was recruited in 2008 and followed the same pattern of interviews before and within the first year after their child's birth[2]. Participants were aged between 15 and 41 at the time of their child's birth and most were married or cohabiting. The majority of men were in full-time employment, although for this paper we focus on the experience of some of those who were not in full-time employment outside of the home, in order to elucidate these more unusual experiences.

This paper involves a combination of thematic and case study analysis. Data were initially identified through thematic analysis in relation to three main themes: unemployment, home-working and stay-at-home fathering experiences of 12 participants across the sample. Once this data was identified, case study examples

[1] Eric and Bob are part of this sample
[2] Marcus, William and Bradley are part of this sample

were chosen in order to foreground the participant accounts which had changed over time in relation to lived experience, highlighting the value of QLL and temporal data (Henwood and Shirani, 2012). For example, some men were economically inactive across all the interviews but their experiences are not presented here. Instead we focus on the particular contribution which can be made via qualitative longitudinal research and foreground the experiences of those whose circumstances changed over the course of the study. The paper therefore explores changing relationships to male breadwinner ideology in light of participants' present circumstances, illustrating how commitment to a particular masculine subject position is not fixed but can alter temporally. Whilst the small number of cases presented in this paper preclude large-scale generalisations, focusing on cases enables us to privilege individual stories and biographies (Thomson, 2007), exploring how people experience change over time (Lewis, 2007).

As our research is based on interviews with fathers only, we are limited in the extent to which we can attempt to draw conclusions about mothers' experiences. However we do not wish to suggest that women do not also experience pressures around employment, and touch on this throughout the paper.

The challenges of unemployment

The literature on men's experiences of unemployment underlines the continuing emphasis on providing as a central feature of hegemonic masculinity (Morgan, 2001). The absence of a position as provider therefore has implications for men's identity as fathers (Doucet, 2006b) particularly given expectations in contemporary parenting

culture about the importance of investing time, money and emotion in one's children in order to provide them with the 'best start' (Shirani *et al*., 2012).

Five men across the sample experienced unemployment at some stage during the research process; two who had chosen not to work and three who were unable to find employment. As part of the latter category, Eric's case illustrates the impact of his changing employment circumstances on his fatherhood identity. At the time of his daughter's birth Eric (then aged 34) lived in a coastal town with his wife Kate – a nurse – and her 10 year-old son from a previous relationship. Eric was employed on a short-term academic research contract and articulated a sense of pressure to secure further employment contracts; which became more acute post-birth due to his wife's reduced income. In these early stages of his daughter's life, Eric felt that providing financially was an important way for him to make a contribution when there were practical barriers to hands-on care (Shirani and Henwood, 2011). As with many new fathers, Eric described his involvement in terms of support and providing the material underpinnings of family life (Townsend, 2002).

> I feel much more responsible, much more a supporting parent at this moment in time. Like I am there just bringing the money in at the end of the day, I feel that this is quite a strong role for me at the moment.

Whilst financial provision is seen as important, Eric describes this as a family income; highlighting the possibility of his wife being the provider if he were to experience unemployment.

> I feel more of a pressure to bring that money in, but at the same time and if the situation could have been the other way around; like if I had to be out of work for a certain amount of time and my wife provided then it would have been similar. It is just a family income, where it is coming from doesn't matter so much.

A few months after this interview, Eric experienced a period of unemployment. When he was interviewed again several years later, he suggests that he had found this more problematic than previously anticipated.

> I was at home for two or three months and did some little bits and pieces just to get some money coming in, which was very annoying, I didn't like it at all … I just did a bit of gardening here and there, which really annoyed me.

I: Why did it annoy you, 'cause it was, the instability of it?

> The instability and feeling that I couldn't provide for my family. Very, very traditional and very weird to feel that in myself because I always thought I was quite a liberal modern man (amusement) and suddenly you feel very upset that you can't provide for your family … I really feel strong that both kind of financially but also emotionally I'm there for my family. And that was quite difficult not having a job and not feeling, feeling I was kind of being dependent on them rather than they being dependent on me, which I found quite difficult.

In early interviews Eric had described his ‘modern’ approach to parenting based on egalitarian role-sharing and his recourse to traditional discourses of providing was therefore surprising. He suggests his discomfort with unemployment was related to feelings of dependency on his family, in a reversal of ‘sturdy oak’ models of masculinity (David and Brannon, 1976). In this way he links his position as financial provider to his ability to provide emotionally; indicating constraints across multiple aspects of his father identity (see Christiansen and Palkovitz, 2001 for discussion of this issue).

After this period of unemployment, Eric found a job some distance away, which required a long commute. The couple dealt with this by operating a system of ‘weather house’ parenting (Hardyment, 2007) where Eric’s wife worked nights and weekends, caring for the children during weekdays whilst he was responsible for care at nights and weekends. He described this as an ‘incredibly hard’ period which ‘wore us both out’ and was therefore unsustainable over the long-term. Eric expressed concerns that he lacked time with his daughter during this period as she was often asleep for most of his weeknight childcare, although felt spending time alone with her at weekends contributed to ‘quite a nice bonding’. However, such an approach can prove particularly costly for the couple relationship.

When his daughter was eight years old, the family relocated due to a change in Eric’s job. Kate gave up work at this point, thus positioning the couple in a much more traditional breadwinner/housewife arrangement. Although Kate’s economic inactivity was a choice, Eric described how she had found this more difficult than anticipated.

> [Not working] is a big gap, a big gap she fell into to be really honest I think, it’s bigger than she anticipated … the gap of not working and feeling, not being part of the working community and feeling less valued by society than being a working person. Suddenly you’re only a mother to Phoebe or the wife to the husband who is working rather than being an economic entity in yourself. Which came quite hard I must say.

With a move towards a more traditional division of labour, Eric no longer expressed concerns about dependency and gained a sense of fulfilment from his employment. However, he raised concerns about missing out on time alone with his daughter and the ‘one-to-one feedback’ from this, suggesting a more marginalised position in the home. Towards the end of the interview Eric suggested he had not entirely been able to be the kind of father he had imagined being before Phoebe was born and wished he was able to spend more time with her; reflecting back on the one-to-one time a weather house parenting approach had afforded.

Although the theme of providing is evident throughout Eric’s interviews, it gains prominence or recedes in relation to his current employment circumstances. When Eric was not in paid work, inability to provide is prominent in his account as he laments this enforced dependency. However, when in secure employment he does not appear to attach the same weight to providing and expresses concerns about lack of time with his daughter. Whilst he interprets his feelings about changing employment in relation to masculinity – moving between modern and traditional positions – that his wife apparently experienced similar challenges during her period of unemployment suggests a relationship with broader notions of citizenship bound up

with paid work in neoliberalism (Featherstone, 2003). Eric's account would appear to provide support for the argument that, whilst it remains central, providing alone is insufficient to substantiate fatherhood or masculine identity and involvement in home life and childcare is also fundamental (Thomas and Bailey, 2006).

Home-working fathers

In light of Eric's account of unemployment, we turn to the experiences of home-working fathers; providing an insight into the relationship between a provider identity and the spatial separation of work and home. Previous research has highlighted home-working as problematic in terms of isolation, with a more sociable and clearly demarcated workplace viewed as more desirable (Baines, 2002). However it has also been suggested that home-working can offer benefits by disrupting spatial configurations of fathering practices; allowing new time-space flexibility in fathers' potential involvement with their children and providing an opportunity for the reinvention or transformation of fathering practices (Halford, 2006). Accordingly, it is useful to consider the extent to which home-working fathers are able to embrace these altered opportunities for involvement, or whether they remain tied to an economic model of fatherhood which emphasises providing.

Four men experienced a period where they were working from home during the course of their child's first year. For one man this was a longstanding arrangement, whilst for the others it was a temporary alteration to normal working practices. Marcus (30) was employed in a managerial role in a large financial organisation and living in a city suburb when his wife (a civil servant) became pregnant. Whilst emphasising how he hoped to be involved with his child, Marcus

was clear that he would be uncomfortable with relinquishing employment to take on a caring role.

> 21st century dad can be the one who stays at home while the mother is the breadwinner and isn't around. Now personally I'm not sure that that's necessarily the right model or anything … I certainly have reservations about the idea of it, you know, becoming more of the norm … whether that would be a good change or not I don't know.

Whilst this was a view echoed by other men across the sample, Marcus was unusual in having several months of paid leave before starting his new job in a managerial role at a rival financial organisation, during which time he was able to take on additional childcare. However, he described feeling limited in this by not wanting to upset his wife's 'strict routine' in case this caused difficulties when he returned to full-time work. Marcus would sometimes take his son out alone, yet was one of the few men who felt there was a negative public reaction to this.

> It has been interesting seeing other people's reaction to it; you do get some strange looks as a dad, especially when I'm out food shopping … you drive up and people see a young bloke in a sports car and you're trying to pull into one of the mother and baby spaces, and I have got some kind of serious finger wagging from people and you literally have to point to the baby seat in the front seat to kind of justify why you're doing it … I've noticed since I've been on leave that if I go to the supermarket during the week there are people that

> can't quite fathom out, there are kind of quizzical looks. It's probably me putting two and two together and putting words into their minds so to speak but it's almost as if they're looking at you thinking "hang on, why aren't you at work? Why are you pushing a little baby around? Where's the mother?" there's something that doesn't compute with the usual social stereotypes … I have noticed quite a few people who kind of look you up and down and like "there's something I don't quite understand and like about that situation so I'm going to give you a wide berth".

Marcus suggests that there is some disjuncture between being a 'young bloke in a sports car' and being seen in the supermarket 'pushing a little baby around'. Unlike the positive reaction other men across the sample reported from being seen publicly as caring fathers, Marcus perceives public suspicion that he is not fulfilling his fatherly position as financial provider. Like a number of the stay-at-home fathers referred to by Doucet and Merla (2007:463), Marcus appeared to struggle for 'social legitimacy' in his non-working role, given his perceptions of a 'climate of public judgement of men at home'. Additionally, the notion that people were thinking 'where's the mother?' suggests that the father is positioned as an inadequate care provider for a small child (Doucet, 2006b). During his interview Marcus expressed dissatisfaction with being between home and work whilst on paid leave; neither worker nor carer. In addition, the position he finds himself in may be uncomfortably close to the scenario he describes having 'reservations about' in the first interview. Thus, it may be that his unusual response about public perceptions is related to his lack of identity as a provider and related insecurities arising from his changing relationship to caring.

Interviewed several months later when he had returned to full-time paid work outside the home, these concerns were no longer present in Marcus’ account.

> I haven’t been quite so conscious of that as late but I suppose that’s because Steph’s been doing more of the shopping. Okay when I take Isaac to [play centre], take him swimming or whatever, you do get some quizzical looks but because it’s weekends rather than during the week it’s a slightly different dynamic.

Marcus relates potentially challenging experiences of being a man in female-dominated spaces – which many men across the sample described – but is less vocal about negative perceptions than he had been in the earlier interview. By being seen to do caring at the weekends rather than during the week a ‘different dynamic’ is created, meaning Marcus’ provider identity was no longer in question. His further experience of fathering may also have prompted greater confidence in his caring abilities so he is less concerned about being seen as an appropriate caregiver.

William (30) worked in business development for a large national company and lived in a modern urban housing estate with his wife, a product developer. Prior to his daughter’s birth, William expressed a strong sense of being a provider, although his wife worked the same hours for a similar wage. However, despite these feelings, he continues to highlight the importance of an equal parenting relationship.

> I do see it as almost being my responsibility to see the money comes in and bills are paid, but I don’t want that to be the impression my child gets, I want them to see us both as equal parents. But you do just feel

> that as a man - especially now because I’m going to become a dad - that you do feel the final responsibility falls with you, rightly or wrongly, and I’ll still feel that way as a father. I don’t want that to be the image that comes across as me the breadwinner and her the mother and me the disciplinarian and her the one that lets it get away with things, I want it to be quite an equal partnership.

A few months after his daughter’s birth, William spent several months working from home as part of the flexible working provision of his employment. This enabled him to participate in some weekday activities with his daughter; although again raised some challenges of being a man in these female-dominated spaces (Doucet, 2006a). Whilst he relates to Marcus’ perspective, William places more emphasis on the perception that he is not seen as an involved or co-resident carer.

> I think the strangest thing is when you go out with your daughter on your own … people look at you as if you’re babysitting … I’ve been in shops before with my daughter, pushing the pram, doing a bit of shopping, and I’ve had people ask me if I’m babysitting rather than automatically thinking [she] was mine and I don’t know why that is, it’s very strange. People don’t seem to relate to you with a child on your own, either think you’re a weekend dad or think you’re babysitting … walking round Smiths on a Saturday getting a paper or whatever and you almost feel like people are looking at you like you’re a weekend dad and you’re divorced, looking after your kid for the weekend.

I: Okay, that’s interesting

> I dunno it’s probably just me, probably all in my mind I dunno … I think everything’s geared up towards children and their mums. Even if you notice things like changing rooms in shops, they’re normally mum and baby and things like that. I hate that, I find that really irritating … it is exactly that, which ties in with people thinking I’m babysitting sometimes.

Here William relates similar concerns to those expressed by Marcus; that the father alone is not seen as an appropriate carer for a young baby, which is reinforced by a lack of facilities for fathers caring in public. Unlike Marcus’ concerns about being seen as a provider, it is the questioning of his caring competencies which are most prominent in William’s account as the parenting identity he is investing in does not appear to be recognised by others. This is clearly highlighted when he describes an embarrassing incident calling his competence into question.

> She screamed at me really loudly in a coffee shop … I picked her up and her face just went red and she let out the biggest, loudest scream right in my face and everyone turned round. I wasn’t ashamed or anything I was just embarrassed … Just everyone was looking at me, everyone was looking at me and I thought they were thinking that I couldn’t look after my kid, that’s what it was.

When William was interviewed one year later he had started a new job and resumed working outside the home. Like Marcus, his perceptions of negative public reactions and questions of his competence had been largely alleviated.

> I don’t notice it as much; it was just something that I noticed a lot more when she was younger. Maybe I’ve stopped looking; maybe I’ve stopped noticing how other people react. Or maybe I only ever imagined it, that’s probably the most likely one. But I did definitely feel like that in the early days whereas I don’t notice feeling that way anymore.

When both Marcus and William had returned to work outside the home, and had grown more confident in their fathering abilities, these initial perceptions were no longer cause for concern. William appears to attempt being a ‘working father’ in the way Ranson (2011) describes, yet practical barriers and his perception of negative public reactions complicated his ability to father in this way. Underlying financial tensions during this time may also have exacerbated William’s concerns (see Henwood *et al*., 2010 for discussion). Aside from the youngest fathers, who felt they were judged negatively because of their age, William and Marcus were unusual in their perceptions of public reactions to their fathering. That both men suggested the negative perceptions were imagined is perhaps more indicative of their own underlying anxieties related to their current circumstances rather than reflecting actual public perceptions.

Stay-at-home fathers

Given the concerns raised by unemployed and home-working fathers in relation to the lack of a provider identity, one might expect such anxieties to be magnified for stay-at-home fathers where labour market ties are further marginalised. In her in-depth study with Canadian stay-at-home fathers, Doucet (2006b) found that not working meant some of the fathers felt like failed men because they were not providing. Therefore she suggests that stay-at-home fathers face challenges in deviating from some of the moral and social scripts which underpin parenting.

Two men in the study became stay-at-home fathers several months after the birth of their first child. Bradley (26) fitted childcare into his existing routine of working a few hours a week from home for the local council, whilst Bob (36) experienced a more significant change in circumstances as he gave up full-time employment in a sales role at a car dealership in order to care for his son. For Bob, there was a long-standing expectation that this would happen as his partner had the more lucrative job. Whilst noting some concerns, during the pregnancy he is largely positive about the impending change:

> [T]he plan is at the moment, I'm going to be a full-time househusband. After the birth my wife will go back to work and I will leave work, so I'm planning on being a full-time dad … to be perfectly honest I can't wait.

In Bradley's case, the couple had not planned who would take on the primary caring but waited to see how they felt post-birth. Bradley lived with his wife, a communications officer, in an ex-mining town.

> I mean I would probably, the way I am now with Nicola doing most of the money earning would’ve been a horrendous idea twenty or thirty years ago but it works so, we’re happy and I can just do what I want and she does as well so everyone wins … as long as the mortgage gets paid at the end of the day it doesn’t really matter beyond that as far as I’m concerned. And I think that’s a good environment as well for the child to see that it’s flexible and you can work around them … as long as the stuff that needs doing gets done I don’t really see a problem.

Both men experienced a ‘negative social gaze’ (Doucet, 2004:289) in relation to their reversal of traditional gender roles, particularly from the older generation. Bob described the disbelief of older male customers at the car dealership where he had worked.

> One of them I remember particularly he said well where are you going? Where are you going to work? I said I am not going to work I am going to look after my son full-time. And he said to me he refused to believe me, and he thought that I just didn’t want to tell him where I was going to be working next. And apparently he still doesn’t, somebody spoke to him afterwards and he said he didn’t believe that I had actually done it. And another one told me that I was making a big mistake, and that he wouldn’t do that.

Such negative reactions had posed challenges for Bob in his last few weeks of employment as he ‘had to put up with everybody at work giving me their opinions on whether or not I should become a house husband’. Similarly, Bradley also experienced negative reactions, both from members of the local community and within his own family.

> [M]y parents and Nicola’s parents, they think that Nicola’s got her priorities wrong … that she doesn’t need to be in work. But it’s like well not, missing the point than I’m not at work and I’m with Meg … they can’t comprehend that Nicola’s not doing the washing and the housework and I am … that she’s not got those responsibilities because I take them on. I just think there’s a little bit in some people that they think it’s wrong and it should be the traditional way round, but I think for most people it’s just that their mind is so fixed, you know, everyone that they ever know has done it the other way round, they just can’t see that it’s exactly the same but just with us swapped.

Whilst Bradley’s wife found it difficult to deal with these negative perceptions, Bradley suggests those who hold them are stuck in a ‘traditional’ mindset, living in an ‘old-fashioned’ community where ‘the culture hasn’t moved on’ from ideas of the breadwinner/housewife model. Against this background, Bradley and his wife are positioned as modern and progressive for challenging traditional gender boundaries. The negative reaction from Nicola’s parents was particularly surprising given that Nicola’s father was the primary carer during a significant part of her childhood as a result of his unemployment and subsequent inability to find work.

Bradley suggests that because this was a result of ‘circumstances rather than choice’ they could not identify with his own position and his lack of concern with relinquishing the provider role.

Whilst negative perceptions could potentially make for uncomfortable public encounters, these men did not relate the same concerns as those expressed by the home-working fathers. Both received comments suggesting they were seen as babysitters, yet unlike the home-working fathers were ‘not bothered’ by this, as Bob suggests he does not feel the need to be recognised as his child’s primary carer.

> If I go to all these exotic places like Tescos’, the women at the checkout, and you see if I went to Tesco’s before we had Charlie nobody would take any notice … But if I go in with him they will talk to you, and most of them will say “oh you are babysitting for the day are you?” And I say “yes I babysit every day” … somebody else asked me whether that annoyed me and they assumed that it would annoy me. But I don’t get very annoyed especially with things like that.
>
> *I- So you don’t feel that need to be recognised as a full time carer?*
>
> No and quite often you know if someone says something like “you have been left holding the baby” or something, I just say “yeah” I am not even bothered to correct them most of the time.

Bradley relates a similar perspective in relation to being the only father in child-centred spaces.

> I’ll be the only father there, but that doesn’t bother me really. Like I say, the small talk issue with that I can’t be doing with, I’m much happier taking her to you know like [children’s café] where ‘cause you pay you don’t feel that compulsion to speak to other people, I can sit and read a book and let her play. Or get on with some work or whatever. But I don’t have a problem, I don’t think “oh there are not gonna be any other men there” that doesn’t bother me at all … I don’t fit any of the expectations of people up there (amusement) I’m an outsider as it is, I’m not from round ‘ere you know … I’m already so far beyond their perceptions of what I should be doing when they see me that it’s by the by.

Here Bradley suggests that his status as an outsider makes it easier for him to transgress the normative expectations of parental behaviour within his community, which could prove to be a liberating position. Although engaged in a range of activities with his daughter in different locations, he contrasts the hassle of making ‘small talk’ with other parents in his local community and the relative anonymity of an urban play centre, which he appears to see as preferable.

It may be that as Bob and Bradley had spent time as their children’s primary carers they felt more confident in this position and were therefore impervious to perceptions that they were not appropriate care-givers. Alternatively the

transformative potential of caring work may mean that the stay-at-home fathers were no longer locked in to economic models of fatherhood in the same way that unemployed and home-working fathers often were, given their continuing relationship to the job market. In addition, being alone with their child more frequently than the home-working fathers may also have meant they had had more time to establish resilience to these negative reactions by the time they were interviewed.

Conclusions

In light of intergenerational continuities in models of 'work-focussed' fathering and contemporary policy emphasis on fathers' financial contributions, it is unsurprising that men continue to uphold providing as central to good fatherhood. Across the entire sample, men described the importance of financial stability ensured through secure employment before embarking on fatherhood (see also Henwood, Shirani and Kellett, 2011). Many of the interviews took place during the early stages of fatherhood when men often described barriers to hands-on involvement and reinforced their relationship to providing in order to emphasise their particular contribution to parenting.

This paper has considered the accounts of men whose employment circumstances changed during the course of the research, illustrating how the ebb and flow of men's everyday anxieties can be seen as linked to change in relation to earning and caring. The insight afforded by collecting data over time in a qualitative longitudinal study demonstrates changes in perceptions of fathering in relation to present experiences. For example, our study illustrates how Eric's changing employment experiences worked both to highlight the centrality of providing to his

fathering identity yet make evident that providing alone was not enough. Interestingly Eric related his ability to provide financially and emotionally, suggesting that for him unemployment did not prompt a reinvention of fathering behaviour, but instead created constraints across fathering practice by creating an overwhelming sense of dependency. Marcus also appears to experience similar challenges as he relates his perceptions of negative public reactions when he was not seen to be occupying a provider role. A complexity inherent in contemporary fatherhood is that devotion to work and providing is both a sign of commitment to fatherhood and an activity that detracts from a father's time with his children (Townsend, 2002). Subsequently it is clear that providing alone is insufficient to maintain masculine or fatherhood identity; it is also important for men to be active participants in family life (Thomas and Bailey, 2006). This is illustrated in Eric's account as although extremely positive about returning to work, Eric's sense of marginalisation from family life when the couple adopted a traditional breadwinner/housewife arrangement meant he was not being the kind of father he had imagined because of constraints on time with his daughter.

It is interesting that home-working fathers appeared to experience greater anxiety about not being seen to be adequate providers than stay-at-home fathers; who had relinquished primary breadwinning for an indefinite period. Whilst Halford (2006) suggests that the spatial disruption of traditional fathering practices makes home-working potentially transformative, she concedes that home-working fathers remain centrally concerned with provision for their families. Indeed, our study suggests that given continuing ties to economic models of fatherhood, it is this spatial disruption which makes home-working potentially problematic. Transformation or reinvention appeared somewhat unlikely, particularly in more public spaces, given

continuing emphasis on fathers as providers and the practical barriers to their greater involvement in caring which William described. Such barriers continue to reinforce men's role in families as primarily financial, which goes some way to explaining the anxieties experienced in relation to the lack of a visible provider identity. In contrast, stay-at-home fathers appeared more likely than those who experienced home-working or unemployment to adopt the new models of masculinity discussed by Lane (2009) based on support for changing gender roles. One explanation may be that unlike home-working fathers, stay-at-home dads are not locked into economic models of fathering, instead upholding alternative standards of masculinity, thus the spatial disconnection from work proved less concerning. It may be that their greater experience of care had imbued stay-at-home fathers with more confidence, with the transformative potential of this involved caring offering an alternative father identity to one focussed on economic models of providing. However as we have focussed here on men who have experienced changing circumstances over the course of the research, it is possible that for some men there was not sufficient time for personal transformations (e.g. in relation to masculinity) to emerge.

The elements of choice and desire are also influential in the way changing work situations were experienced. This is evident in Bradley's account, where his own caregiving by choice is distinguished from his father-in-law's experience of taking on a caring role due to circumstances. Marcus and Eric also experienced altered work identities as a result of changing circumstances, as neither had wanted to relinquish their identity as paid worker outside the home. The subsequent dissatisfaction they experienced may have prompted a heightened sensitivity towards their perceptions of other people's reactions. William's period of home-working was a choice based on options provided by his employer and although he is less conscious

of negative reactions to his apparent lack of a provider identity, his impression that he is not regarded as an appropriate carer is more troublesome. For William, attempting to take on this role was made challenging by a lack of public facilities for fathers to care for their children, which he felt underlined the view that fathers are providers rather than carers. Without addressing these barriers and related practices, gender equality both at home and work will remain elusive (Ranson, 2011). Increasing male unemployment in light of the economic downturn is likely to prompt changing circumstances in relation to earning and caring. This offers a potential opportunity for the transformation of fathering practices in the longer-term, although continuing emphasis on fathers as economic providers and lack of choice over these altered circumstances pose barriers to achieving this. Instead, such a transformation would only appear possible in relation to changes in the moral scripts which underpin parenting.

In this paper we have positioned providing in relationship to masculinity, yet data relating to Eric's wife Kate indicate the lack of a visible worker identity may be problematic more generally. His account of the 'gap' she experienced by no longer being 'an economic entity' resonates with research which suggests paid work is valued over other forms of citizenship in the context of neoliberalism (Featherstone, 2003; Lister, 2006). Similarly, Marcus described his wife's sense of vulnerability at no longer having financial independence through her own paid employment. These accounts therefore indicate that unemployment is not only problematic in relation to masculinity but in understandings of citizenship more generally. However, despite the evidence of women's concerns about unemployment, men across the sample clearly articulated expectations that it was their responsibility to provide financially, often regardless of actual financial and employment circumstances. Therefore we argue that

whilst work forms a fundamental part of many women's identities, they are perhaps less subject to the moral and social scripts stressing primary breadwinning, which many men in our sample appeared to experience (Shirani *et al*., 2011).

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